



***Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks***

**DECISION NOTICE**

**FOR**

**STATEWIDE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
P.O. Box 200701  
1420 East 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Helena, MT 59620**

**December 10, 2012**

# **Decision Notice for Statewide Fisheries Management Plan and Environmental Assessment**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Beginning September 10, 2012, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invited the public to provide comments on a Draft Statewide Fisheries Management Plan (Draft Plan) and an accompanying Draft Environmental Assessment (EA). The Plan will guide FWP fisheries management in Montana and describes FWP's main fisheries programs, current operations and areas of work within these programs, and the management emphasis and priorities for all waters of the State. The plan will help guide regulation setting, budget and project prioritization, and routine management decision-making. The Department prepared a Draft EA to consider the possible impacts to the human environment, as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The EA examined the core Fisheries Management programs listed in Part I of the Plan (fish management, habitat, and fishing access / recreation management), focusing on the overall management approach for each program. Additional environmental review will take place during the implementation of the plan, primarily when implementing the drainage management prescriptions listed in Part II of the plan (environmental analysis on projects and management actions).

The Department has prepared a Decision Notice based on an analysis of the public comments received and the Draft EA. The Decision Notice serves two primary purposes:

- 1) The Decision Notice summarizes the Department's recommendations to the FWP Commission for a Final Plan, including substantive changes to the Draft Plan.
- 2) The Decision Notice determines whether an Environmental Assessment was the appropriate level of analysis, versus preparing a more in-depth Environmental Impact Statement.

The Decision Notice is organized as follows:

- 1) Overview on public involvement process
- 2) Summary of public comments
- 3) Director's recommendations to the FWP Commission for a Final Plan
- 4) Director's decision on adequacy of Environmental Assessment per MEPA

All of the original public comments and the Department's responses will be shared with the FWP Commission, and together with the Draft EA and this Decision Notice, make up the Final EA. Comments and responses are available on the FWP website: [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov) (link to statewide fisheries management plan).

The FWP Director is the decision-maker for the Decision Notice and the FWP Commission is the decision-maker for the Final Plan. The Commission is scheduled to make its decision at the December 20, 2012 Commission meeting at FWP Headquarters in Helena, MT.

## **OVERVIEW ON PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS**

The public involvement process and outreach efforts included the following:

- Commission meetings (monthly updates to the Commission throughout the preparation of the Draft Plan)
- FWP web page ([fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov)) devoted to planning process with ability for people to review the draft plan and submit comments online
- Montana Outdoors magazine article (July-August) explaining the need for the plan and how it will be used
- Comment period (47 days, including a two week extension)
- Press releases (statewide and regional media outlets)
- Post cards mailed directly to a 1500-member mailing list of interested persons and groups
- Direct communication with angling groups, e.g., Walleyes Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Anglers Forum, etc.
- Radio show coverage (Montana Outdoors Radio)
- Public meetings (10 public meetings across the state: Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Glasgow, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, Lewistown, Miles City, and Missoula).

## **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS**

A total of 77 individuals, groups, and agencies submitted comments on the draft plan and EA. Many of these provided more than one comment. All of the original comments and the Department's responses will be sent to the FWP Commission and available for public review on the FWP website. Highlights from these comments are listed below.

- Overall support for the development of a statewide fisheries management plan, and comments in support of specific components (sections) of the plan.
- Questions about how the plan will be evaluated over time, e.g., between when it is adopted and when it is formally reviewed in six years.
- Request for more details on whether the plan will allow for flexibility during implementation in response to changing conditions.
- Observations that the plan is largely a documentation of existing programs, requesting that the plan include more details with specific objectives and priorities.
- Request that the plan address the topic of climate change.
- Request for changes to the use of Management Types and Fish Origin Labels to better clarify the intent and use of these labels.
- Request that the plan do more to describe how FWP manages non-native fish and their value in providing angling opportunities.

- Request that the plan do more to explain how FWP responds to illegal introductions of fish.
- Comments on native fish management and concerns about the effects of non-native fish on native species.
- Comments on critical habitat for bull trout and concern that management prescription might conflict with critical bull trout habitat in some locations.
- Request for more information on how FWP evaluates its hatchery program, including prioritization of stocking requests, efficiencies in operation, opportunities to use hatcheries for native fish recovery, and how money is being spent.
- Request for more emphasis on the importance of family and youth angling opportunities and information about FWP efforts to promote these opportunities.
- Various comments on species management in a particular waterbody, e.g., walleye in the Missouri River below Holter Dam, lake trout in Flathead Lake, and bull trout in the Clark Fork River.
- Comments on the draft environmental assessment, how it was prepared, its scope of analysis, and the document's conclusion that an EIS was not warranted.
- Concern that the comment period did not provide enough time for the public to participate.

## **DIRECTOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FINAL PLAN**

The FWP Commission is the final decision-maker and as such will be asked to adopt a Final Statewide Fisheries Management Plan. It is the FWP Director's responsibility to recommend a Final Plan to the Commission based on the Draft Plan, comments from the public, results of the environmental analysis, and input from FWP staff.

The EA provided alternative management approaches for each of the Fisheries Programs: Fisheries Management, Fisheries Habitat, and Fishing Access and Recreation Management. For each program, the EA identified a *preferred alternative* that represented status quo, the current program. The Draft Statewide Fisheries Management Plan described (represented) the preferred alternatives, or status quo.

The Director's decision is to recommend a Final Plan that is based on the preferred alternatives (Draft Plan) with some changes that are in response to public comments and/or serve to improve the clarity or meaning of language in the plan. Proposed substantive changes to the Draft Plan are summarized below (see Proposed Final Plan for complete document).

- New section on plan evaluation and adaptive management. There are more details on how the department may assess the effectiveness of the plan during the six-year life of the plan, e.g., an annual review/report, a mid-term evaluation, etc. In regard to adaptive management, the

proposed final plan provides enough flexibility to managers during its implementation to accommodate changing conditions and angling interests, but without compromising or conflicting with the direction set forth in the plan.

- New section on climate change. Describes the effects of climate change on fisheries management and ways that FWP adapts to changing thermal conditions.
- New section on non-native fish management.
- Changes to the Fish Origin labels to clarify the recruitment source for fish in a particular waterbody.
- More details on the conservation strategy and goals for cutthroat trout in the Upper Missouri River drainage.
- Addition of a non-native species management section to Part I of the Plan to reflect the importance of non-native species for angling opportunities and FWP's approach to managing these species.
- New section that describes the Community Pond Program and other efforts to provide and encourage use of family and youth angling opportunities.
- Added emphasis on the detrimental effects of illegal fish introductions and a description of FWP efforts to curtail this practice in accordance with its policy on responding to illegal introductions.
- Revisions to the plan further explaining the triploid walleye program, how it is implemented, its role in providing angling opportunities for walleye, and its role in sauger conservation efforts.
- Revisions to the hatchery section in the plan to describe ongoing and future evaluations of the FWP hatchery system for the purpose of improving efficiency and effectiveness.
- Edits throughout the document to improve clarity.

## **DECISION ON ADEQUACY OF EA**

FWP did not identify any significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with the proposed Statewide Fisheries Management Plan. Therefore, as FWP Director, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

/s/

Mike Volesky  
FWP Director (Acting)

Date

12/10/12